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TWO NOTES ON THE *COMMEDIA*

1. *INFERNO*, XXXIV, 127-139

In the *Rivista d'Italia*, Vol. xiii, no. 5, p. 701, Francesco D'Ovidio, with his usual masterly clearness and ingenuity, discusses the passage from Lucifer's feet to the Island of Purgatory, showing that in all probability the "buca d'un sasso ch'egli [il ruscelletto] ha roso" refers only to the crust of the earth under the island (the roof of the cavity opposite Hell), and that the "entrammo" of l. 134 may mean simply "started" or "proceeded." The cavern into which Satan's feet project is vaguely indicated by the poet. D'Ovidio conceives it either as a vast conical pit similar in size and shape to Hell, or as a cylindrical hole extending straight from the circular floor (the "picciola spera" of l. 116) to the earth's outer rind. Judging from ll. 124-126, one naturally thinks of it as equal in volume to the Mountain of Purgatory; but the dimensions of that mountain cannot be determined with any approach to exactness. Down the sloping side—or the vertical wall—of the abyss, runs, according to D'Ovidio, the guiding streamlet, either in a zigzag course like a path up a precipice, or winding spirally round and round the cavity. Both the "natural burella" of l. 98 and the "loco" of l. 127 he takes as referring to this whole cavern.

Now it is to be noted that throughout the *Inferno* Dante exerts his utmost cleverness to confuse his reader concerning vertical distances, his purpose evidently being to heighten the realism of his literal narrative by dissimulating the physical impossibility of traversing several thousand miles, largely on foot, in twenty-four hours. In two cases he represents himself as transported, we know not how far, in a swoon; in three, he dismisses the descent in a word or two, keeping the reader's attention fixed on the horizontal shelves; in one, he describes a downward flight, in which all sense of distance is lost, on the back of a dragon. But the most curious instance is that of the transfer from the eighth circle to the ninth, at the end of Canto xxxi. The giant Antæus, he says, picks up the two poets on the edge of the eighth and sets them down on the

floor of the ninth; only his stoop is described, as he bends first to take and then to deposit his passengers, and one would never imagine, from this passage, that he left his place. Yet Antæus is only about eighty feet tall, and the two circles must, according to what Dante tells us elsewhere, be separated by a precipice some miles in height.

Bearing in mind this tendency of our author, we may, I think, by carrying still further the line of argument so ably employed by D'Ovidio, remove at least two difficulties that remain even in his interpretation. How can a "place" that contains a part of Beelzebub be described as "remote" from him?

*Loco è laggiù da Belzebù remoto
Tanto quanto la tomba si distende.*

Secondly, how can we account for a brook that descends a steep — perhaps vertical — precipice in a gentle zigzag or spiral, instead of pouring precipitously down? In ll. 97-99,

*Non era camminata di palagio
Là 'v' eravam, ma natural burella
Ch' avea mal suolo, e di lume disagio,*

Dante gives us a hint of a dark, disagreeable space on the other side of Hell; and he refers to it again, incidentally, in l. 125:

Per fuggir lui lasciò qui il loco vuoto.

After that, as I believe, he tells us nothing more about it, deliberately skipping, between lines 126 and 127, his whole ascent from Lucifer's feet to the earth's crust, and leaving the intervening space figuratively as well as literally in the dark. With l. 127 he takes a fresh start, and from this point on describes only the passage through the crust. The very phraseology, "Loco è laggiù," etc., indicates that he is speaking of something not previously mentioned, and that the "loco" of l. 125, which designates the same place as the "natural burella" of l. 98, is not identical with the "loco" of l. 127. If this be admitted, the "tomba" of l. 128 may be understood as referring to the great void under the Island of Purgatory: "There is a place down yonder (on the further side of the globe, beneath the surface) as far away from Beelzebub as his sepulcher stretches" — that is, separated from him by the whole depth of the grave he dug for himself in his fall.

2. PURGATORIO, XXXI, 144

When Beatrice finally unveils her face, in the Garden of Eden, Dante asks: "What poet could depict thee

. . . qual tu paresti
Là dove armonizzando il ciel t'adombra,
Quando nell'aere aperto ti solvesti?"

This seems to be generally understood, at the present day, as meaning "where Heaven, with its harmony, is thine image" — an interpretation which is satisfactory enough until one begins to question the significance of "là dove." Whether we take this phrase as "where" or "when," it appears to have no particular appropriateness. Heaven is always and everywhere harmonious and therefore a fit symbol of Beatrice. One does not see why its fitness should be restricted to the Terrestrial Paradise or to this occasion.

Another explanation, frequently proposed in the past, would make the line read: "Where harmonious Heaven encompassed thee," *adombra* being used for *adombrava*, as the present replaces the imperfect (in the rime) in several similar passages in the *Commedia*. The chief objection to this view is the apparent incongruity of the word *adombra*: the idea of Heaven as a canopy or background for Beatrice, as she stands on the chariot against the sky, is suitable and artistic, but why should the bright vault be said to "shadow" her? Possibly an answer may be found in the authors from whom Dante derived, in part, his conception of the figure.

In the *Convivio* Dante tells us that one of the two works with which he began the study of philosophy was the treatise *De Consolatione Philosophiæ* of Boethius; and, in fact, we see abundant evidence of the influence of this masterpiece on his ideas, his form of expression, and his representation of Lady Philosophy in the *Convivio* and of Beatrice in the *Purgatorio*. An Italian to whom Dante considered himself vastly indebted was Brunetto Latini, who "taught him how man makes himself eternal." Latini's *Tesoretto* not only presents the same general literary type as the *Commedia*, being a didactic poem in allegorical form, but also offers a few resemblances of detail. As a prelude to his vision, Brunetto loses himself in a strange wood (ii, 75-78), where he suddenly comes to his senses (iii, 1), and presently lifts up his eyes to the mountains. It may

be noted, further, that in iv, 18, he uses the word *consumare* in the same sense in which Dante, to the confusion of commentators, employs it in the *Inferno*, ii, 41.

When Lady Philosophy shows herself to the imprisoned and recreant Boethius (I, Pr. i), she appears at times to touch the sky with her head: "Nam nunc quidem ad communem sese hominum cohibebat, nunc vero pulsare cælum summi verticis cacumine videbatur; quæ cum altius caput extulisset, ipsum etiam cælum penetrabat respicientiumque hominum frustrabatur intuitum." This passage Brunetto Latini evidently remembered when he described the aspect of Lady Nature, as she reveals herself to the lost exile:

Talor toccava il cielo
Sì che pareva suo velo.

And both of these figures would seem to have been present in Dante's mind when he depicted Lady Revelation, her head enveloped in sky, —

There where the harmonious Heaven is thine only veil.

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